



SEEING THE WORLD THROUGH ISLAMIC EYES

by Keith W. Stump

The Middle East is in ferment. At the center is Islam. It is time to dispel widespread myths and misconceptions about this important religion, and to see what the Bible says about Islam and the world's future!

NOT SINCE the days of the Crusades has religion played such a crucial role in world affairs.

From Morocco to Indonesia, Islam is reemerging as a political and religious force that cannot be ignored. Moslems are reasserting their faith—culturally, spiritually and politically.

“God may be dead in the West,” one observer has commented, “but He is very much alive in the Middle East!”

Westerners Confused

Few topics have created as much misunderstanding in the Western world as that of Islam. Most Westerners do not begin to com-

prehend the religion and culture of that important faith.

Yet few topics are as vital to understand during this momentous last quarter of the 20th century!

Moslems are well aware of how Western cartoonists depict them, how Hollywood portrays them, how Westerners write about them. The exaggerated and misleading stereotype of the robed, hook-nosed camel driver is well known—and widely resented—throughout the Middle East.

To fill this void we publish this article for our readers.

Events in the Moslem world are too often interpreted through *Western* eyes. Western observers often impose their own precon-

ceived notions onto events there and interpret them according to Western criteria. They see religion from the vantage point of their own limited Western experience.

Here lies the root of the West's gross misunderstanding of the Moslem world.

Proper “Camera Setting”

To properly comprehend the Moslem world, it is necessary to put oneself into Moslem shoes, to think in Moslem terms, *to see the world through Moslem eyes*. From that perspective one can begin to acquire a deeper insight into Islam and its role in world events today.

A century ago, when Britain

was wrestling with troublesome problems in Egypt and the Sudan, Prime Minister Gladstone thought it wise to study the Koran, Islam's Holy Book. Only that way, he asserted, could he really come to know the people and the faith with which he was contending.

Despite the questionable results of his Middle Eastern policies, Gladstone had at least understood in principle the importance of viewing the Moslem world from the proper vantage point, the proper "camera setting."

It is also time to understand what *the Bible* says about the Moslem faith and about the significance of events in the Moslem world—now, and in the tumultuous years just ahead!

Popular Religion

Understand, first, the importance of Islam as a contemporary world force. Islam is a global faith. One person in six in the world today—some 800 million people in more than 75 countries—is a Moslem.

Islam is the youngest of the world's major religions, founded six centuries after Jesus and nearly 12 centuries after Buddha. It is also one of the world's most popular religions, possibly the fastest-growing faith on the globe.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Islam is reportedly winning *10 times* as many converts as traditional Christianity!

It is important to understand, too, that not all Arabs are Moslems (some 10 percent are Christian), nor are all Moslems Arabs. Introduced among the Arabs in the seventh century, Islam spread swiftly throughout the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. Multiple millions of non-Arabs were added to the fold of Islam. Within a century Islam controlled an empire more vast than that of Rome or Alexander the Great.

Submission to Allah

Islam means many things to many Moslems. Literally, Islam means "submission to Allah." A Moslem is "one who submits."

Moslems, however, have differing ideas of their faith according to their social class, education, political leanings and cultural background.

Like other religions, Islam has become fragmented over the centuries by theological feuds and disagreements. Today, Islam is split into two main branches, the Sunni and Shiite groups. These two branches resulted from a major schism over the issue of who should succeed to Moslem leadership following the death of the Prophet Mohammed, the religion's founder, in A.D. 632.

Mainstream Sunni Islam—accounting for nearly 90 percent of all Moslems—is divided into four "schools" of interpretation. By contrast, the 10 percent of all Moslems who are Shiites—located primarily in Iran, Iraq, Yemen and Oman—are split into dozens of sects, subsects and offshoots, some of which are considered heretical by Sunni Moslems.

The centuries-long quest for Islamic unity remains a distant dream, due largely to a lack of effective leadership (see "The Arab World in Prophecy", December, 1979, *Plain Truth* U.S. edition). It is therefore difficult to generalize about Islam as if it were a single, coherent bloc.

Nevertheless, all Moslems share certain basic beliefs and outlooks. First and foremost is their oneness creed, called the *shahadah*: "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His Prophet." A solemn recitation of this confession of faith (just eight words in Arabic) is the only requirement for becoming a Moslem.

According to Moslem belief, an archangel—Gabriel—descended to Mohammed, first in A.D. 610, and imparted to him the wisdom of the Koran. At first, Mohammed was afraid he was going insane or was possessed by an evil spirit. But he soon became convinced that his calling was truly from God.

Moslem Holy Book

Moslems consider the Koran's 114 *suras* or chapters as the liter-

al word of God, superseding all previous revelations (including the Bible) and correcting the alleged "errors" that had crept into Christianity and Judaism. In length, the Koran is somewhat shorter than the New Testament.

Mohammed contended that Jews and Christians had been worshipping Allah all along, but under a different name. The Koran recognizes Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and other biblical personalities as genuine prophets through whom God spoke. Mohammed's family lineage is traced to Abraham through the patriarch's grandson Kedar, son of Ishmael (Genesis 25:13).

Moslems, however, regard Mohammed as the greatest and the last (or "seal") of the prophets. Moslems deny the divinity of Jesus, as well as His crucifixion and resurrection. "They do blaspheme who say: 'God is Christ the son of Mary,'" the Koran asserts.

Despite the high position they accord to Mohammed, Moslems do not venerate him as a divine being. They take offense at being called "Mohammedans," feeling that that term implies they worship Mohammed.

In addition to the Koran, most Moslems also pay heed to the *sunna* (the traditions of what Mohammed did) and the *hadith* (the traditions of what he said).

Compared to other religions, Islam is loosely organized. There is no formal institutional hierarchy of authority—no Moslem pope or cardinals—nor a centralized world headquarters, such as the Vatican. The *ulemas*, *mulahs*, *mujtahids* or *ayatollahs*, as Islamic scholars and teachers are variously called, are the closest thing Moslems have to a religious clergy.

Way of Life

To see the world through Moslem eyes, it is necessary to understand that to the vast majority of Moslems, Islam is a *way of life*.

Many Westerners—to whom religion means merely attending church services for an hour or

two on Sunday—simply cannot comprehend the all-pervasive nature of the Islamic faith in the lives of its followers. Most Westerners have long abandoned the challenge of actually *living* their professed faith.

Islam, however, is *central* to every aspect of a Moslem's life. It is far from a Friday-go-to-mosque kind of religion. The average Moslem takes the Koran seriously. He strives diligently to obey its precepts. Islam guides thought and action to a degree virtually without parallel in the West. Religion and life are *inseparable*.

Western visitors to Islamic countries often make the mistake of assuming that because many upper class Moslems speak European languages, dress like Westerners and may have been educated in the West, that they also have adopted Western attitudes toward religion.

Not so.

The overwhelming majority of Moslems of *all* classes and stations diligently pray towards the holy city of Mecca five times each day. On Friday, Moslems observe a special day of public prayer in the mosque.

During the entire holy month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Moslem year, Moslems refrain from food and drink from dawn ("as soon as you can discern a white thread from a black one") to dusk.

Moslems are also expected to make a *hajj* or pilgrimage to sacred Mecca at least once in their lifetime if financially and physically able. Almsgiving to the poor, aged and orphans is also an obligation to Moslems. An annual 2.5 percent *zakat* tax is levied against one's total assets.

In addition to these major directives, the Koran forbids the eating of pork, the drinking of alcohol and gambling. In more liberal Moslem circles, however, these particular observances are often relaxed.

Church-State Union

But Islam is much more than a set of prescribed ritualistic obser-

vances. The Koran contains detailed secular as well as religious injunctions. It lays down standards for a wide range of personal, social, economic and political relationships, and both civil and criminal law. This makes it virtually impossible to confine Islam to spiritual matters alone.

In the Islamic world separation of church and state is unknown. From its inception, Islam has been a state religion. No distinction is made between "God and Caesar," such as spelled out by Jesus in Matthew 22:21.

Of course, the Islamic revolutionary government in Iran is vastly different from the government in Saudi Arabia. This, in turn, is different from that of Egypt, or Pakistan or Libya. Moslem governments range from semi-feudal monarchies to parliamentary democracies.

But regardless of these differences, there is no question among Moslems that religion and government are—and should be—*inseparable*.

Talk of a "secular Moslem country" is generally considered a contradiction in terms. The ultimate failure of the shah's attempt to set up a Western-style state in Iran, ignoring the role of the mullahs, is attributed in part to this deep-seated Moslem view of the necessity of church-state union.

Moslems see government as a major vehicle for accomplishing good in this world. Much more than among professing Christians, whose hope often lies primarily in a "next life," Moslems are committed to the monumental mission of taking history into their hands and fashioning it to what it ought to be.

The realization of good, Moslems believe, is possible *in this world*. They generally do not view this life as an ordeal laden with trials and sorrows through which the faithful must laboriously pass to achieve salvation in the "next world." Instead, the Koran lays out a social and legal order aimed at happiness, prosperity and well-being here and now.

This is not to say that Moslems

do not believe in an afterlife as well. Punishment in hell or reward in paradise is vividly described in the Koran.

Eye for an Eye

One of the most publicized aspects of Moslem life is the strict Koranic code of justice, in force in increasing numbers of Moslem countries.

The *Sharia*, or Koranic canon law, has been condemned in the West as cruel and barbaric. The severity of Koranic punishment shocks most Westerners. For habitual thievery, the penalty may be the loss of a hand. For premarital sex, 100 lashes in public. For false accusation, 80 lashes.

Most Moslems, however, are little concerned with the reactions of the West. The Koran sanctions the Sharia law, and that is sufficient. Moreover, Moslems daily read of the growing crime rate in permissive Western society. "How can the crime-ridden West criticize us?" they ask. Moslem countries have considerably lower crime rates than most Western countries.

The Islamic eye-for-an-eye Sharia law, they also note, is not much different from those civil and criminal laws of the Old Testament given by God to ancient Israel (see Exodus 21-23). Moslems also point out that in their countries, unlike in the "decadent" West, the *seriousness of sin* is still recognized and dealt with accordingly.

Another point must be recognized. Like many Westerners, many Moslems have themselves been horrified by the trials and executions that have been taking place in Iran under the Khomeini regime. They point out that those trials and executions are not a true reflection of Islam, but are instead associated with the political turmoil in that country.

Moslems also observe that the taking of hostages—especially diplomatic ones—is clearly forbidden by Islamic tradition. "I do not break treaties, nor do I make prisoners of envoys," Mohammed once insisted. Many Moslems see the Khomeini regime's actions in

this regard as an embarrassment and a demeaning of Islam before the world.

Actually, the Koran specifies strict limitations on the power of the Moslem religious courts. Accused persons are considered innocent until proven guilty. In addition, the standards of proof are so exacting that severe punishments widely publicized in the West can rarely be carried out. In the case of adultery—punishable by death in some Moslem countries—four actual eye-witnesses are required for conviction.

“Modernization” or “Westernization”?

Another question often asked in the West is whether Islam can be successfully adapted to a modern technological society.

This question is almost always asked by non-Moslems. Moslems themselves do not see Islam as any barrier whatever to modern life. They believe that Islam fits all times and cultures. Moslems are often genuinely surprised that such a question should even be asked.

Let us look at this issue through Moslem eyes. No reading of the Koran could ever produce the notion that Islam is reactionary or tailored only to a primitive desert society. Development and change are not contrary to the spirit of Islam. In fact, the seeking of knowledge and the desirability of progress are heavily *stressed* in the Koran.

Why, then, the controversy over whether Islam can keep pace with modern times?

Islam itself does not oppose technology and industry. But many Moslems have come to recognize a danger in overemphasis on technology and on “progress” in the Western sense. As one Egyptian government official put it: “Islam is not against modernization. But when modernization aims at fulfilling only materialistic needs while disregarding moral matters, it always ends up breaking down the structure of society.”

Moslems contend that science and technology have undermined

faith in religion in the West. If wrongly applied, they fear it could do the same for faith in Allah.

Talk of Islam’s failure to adjust to modernity is usually based on Western definitions and concepts of “modernization” and “progress.” Moslems say that modernization does not have to mean Westernization and secularization. Some Moslems have commented, half-jokingly and half-seriously, that if the West represents the wave of the future, it is better to remain stuck in the past.

Most Moslems do not want to return to some sort of medieval Islamic configuration. They want progress, but they want to proceed cautiously, choosing what is suitable and rejecting what is harmful. This way they hope to avoid reaping the bitter fruits they see as having resulted from the dizzying pace of modernization in the West.

As Saudi Arabia’s King Khalid cautioned in an address to pilgrims at Mecca last year: “We Moslems, the more we hold fast to these eminent ideals, the better are our prospects to get up and bring the world under our control. On the other hand, the farther we veer away from our faith, the faster we succumb to factors of decay and start suffering from political and societal ills, and eventually fall an easy prey to the enemies of Islam. . . .”

Moslems Look at Communism

Just as Moslems are disillusioned with the materialism of the West, they likewise deplore the Communist alternative.

It is not, however, the one-party, dictatorial nature of the communist state that they primarily object to. Many Moslem countries are essentially one-party states. (Moslems often ask, “How can there be other parties besides the party of the righteous?”)

It is the atheism of Marxism that they detest. It is no secret among Moslems that Islam has been suppressed in the Soviet Union in the last half century.

“Who can be guilty of a greater wrong,” the Koran asks, “than one who forbids Allah’s name being glorified in His mosques and seeks to bring about their ruin?”

Moslem countries may cultivate relations with the Soviet Union with a view towards various material benefits such as arms aid. But they have no illusions when it comes to the philosophy and system of communism itself. Islamic states are overwhelmingly anticommunist.

Role of Women

Another sore point to Moslems is the West’s concept of the role of women in Islamic society. Many Westerners know, for example, that women in ultraorthodox Saudi Arabia do not drive cars. They also know about the much-publicized veil and of the *chador*, the head-to-toe black garment worn by women in Iran.

What Moslems wish Westerners would also realize is that the traditions or customs in one Middle Eastern country are not necessarily representative of all Moslem women or necessarily a part of Islam.

As Islam spread from its birthplace in the Arabian Peninsula, the customs of conquered or converted peoples often became entwined with the practices laid down in the Koran. The *chador*, for example, is a traditional Iranian dress, not specifically required by the Koran. The Koran specifies only modesty, which can be interpreted in many ways. Many Iranian women actually prefer to wear the *chador*.

The veil, too, is not required by the Koran. It was introduced during the period of Ottoman Turkish domination of the Middle East, beginning in the 15th century A.D.—more than 800 years after Mohammed.

Increasing numbers of young women throughout the Middle East are donning the veil and covering themselves up with traditional floor-length robes—to the dismay of many of their progressive mothers who fought for

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freedom to wear short skirts. To many of these young women it represents a rejection of Western concepts of femininity and is not based on religion at all.

Mohammed actually advanced the status of women significantly, affording them greater honor than most societies of his time. "O men, respect women who have borne you," the Koran admonishes. Moslem women were given civil and property rights—a revolutionary step in the Arab world. Men, however, are still considered "a degree above" women.

Finally, the practice of polygamy has not been as general as is commonly thought by the West. Few Moslems have more than one wife, despite the fact that the Koran allows four—if the husband can afford them and treat them without partiality.

Moslems Look at the Judeo-Christian World

It is important, too, to understand how Moslems see Christianity and Judaism. Moslems have many misconceptions about these two faiths. In one respect, however, it is not the Moslems who are to be blamed.

Moslems, for example, see the virtual "acceptance" by Western nations of porno movies, alcohol, drugs, illicit sex, acid rock, growing crime and so on. Yet these are supposedly Christian societies!

To a Moslem, who views religion as a *way of life*, this is indeed a paradox. How are these rampant evils, he asks, to be reconciled with the teachings of Christ?

The simple answer, of course, is that they *cannot be reconciled*, for they represent out-and-out rejection of Christ's teachings! Many Moslems simply do not realize that most Western "Christians" only *profess* that faith, not *practice* it. Other Moslems regard Westerners as a species of "pagan."

When it comes to doctrinal

questions, Moslems are especially dismayed over the Christian worship of "the triple God." This is a reference to the "Trinity," which Moslems view as bordering on polytheism and sacrilege. The Catholic veneration of Mary is also conceived as idolatry by Moslems.

Here Moslems make the same mistake that Westerners do when *they* view the veil as a Koranic requirement. Having generally never read the New Testament for themselves, Moslems fail to realize that the Trinity doctrine was *never* taught by Christ or the apostles, that it is nowhere to be found in the Bible, that it actually has its roots in ancient paganism, which was later absorbed into professing Christianity! (Request "The God Family and the Holy Spirit" for a clear understanding of the Bible teaching.)

Moslems, for the most part, have never encountered the true Christianity of the Bible!

In general, however, the Moslem attitude towards Christianity and Judaism is not inherently hostile. Mohammed called Christians and Jews "the People of the Book," and accorded them special status and treatment. Islam also permits marriage with Christians and Jews.

What the Bible Says

Many Western readers will recognize that the Moslem attitude toward religion as a way of life is actually much closer to the attitude Jesus Christ and the apostles intended for true Christians to have towards the Holy Bible. The Bible often refers to true Christianity as "the way" (Acts 18:25, 26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; etc.).

Doctrinally, of course, Islam diverges from Christianity in aspects too numerous to detail within the scope of this article. First and foremost is Islam's rejection of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, of His crucifixion and resurrection, and of forgiveness and salvation through Him.

The apostle Peter left no room for compromise on this point: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other

name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

In view of the central nature of this point to Christianity, the strict monotheism of Islam renders any hope of eventual conciliation between the two faiths impossible.

What, then, does the Bible say of the future of Islam?

The New Testament of the Bible was completed more than 500 years before the birth of Mohammed. Yet the Bible does not ignore the future of Islam!

Bible prophecy reveals the coming emergence of an Arab-Moslem confederation in the Middle East. It is referred to in prophecy as "the king of the south" (Daniel 11:40). This confederation will play a crucial role in end-time events.

At the prophesied return of Jesus to this earth at that critical juncture in history to save mankind from self-destruction (see Matthew 24:22) and usher in a millennial rule of peace and prosperity, God's government will be established over the entire earth. All nations will submit to Him. Church and State will be united under His rule. There will be *one Church—one God—one religion—ONE SUPREME GOVERNMENT!* (Revelation 19:16.)

Many Sunni Moslems look forward to this very event—but they believe that Jesus will descend to Damascus, not Jerusalem as the Bible declares in Zechariah 14. Shia Moslems also look forward to the return of a Messiah or Mahdi—though not Jesus—in the near future.

Religious confusion will forever come to an end. All eyes will be opened to the truth. *All* nations and *all* peoples will come to recognize Jesus as the true Messiah—the Messiah whom, by a variety of names in many religions, they have all long anticipated in ignorance.

This is the clear testimony of Bible prophecy. The events of the years just ahead in the Middle East will bear witness to its unerring accuracy! □